

## Šojmanka

### Women of Eastern Serbia who Communicate with Fairies

MARIA VIVOD

#### Introduction or let's confuse the reader with the multitude of terms

This paper is written to confuse all those researching on the topic of fairy-seeing individuals in Southeastern Europe and those who might be interested in it for some unclear reason. There is a multitude of expressions, designations on various languages for similar phenomena in a relatively small region. The terms often refer to the same phenomenon, but sometimes they don't. The term "the semantic field" in linguistics means, that one word covers a particular meaning, and another covers a different field. The fields can be similar and converge but are not identical. This is the case with the various expressions for fairy-seeing individuals in this region. The phenomenon of individuals capable of communication with creatures of the invisible world was scientifically analyzed in the past six decades and diverse perspectives were offered as theoretical approach: as fragments of pre-Christian belief systems that were mostly found in historical documents such as witch-hunt trials (ELIADE 1975 in general; GINZBURG 1966 for Italy; KLANICZAY 1983, 1984, 2006 for Hungary; HENNINGSEN 1993 and ČIČA 2002 for Croatia), as remnants of still existing complex popular belief systems about witches and fairies and the syncretism between these two female benevolent/malevolent creatures (for instance PÓCS 1986 and ZENTAI 1976, for Central Europe BOŠKOVIĆ-ŠTULLI 1953 and 1960 for Croatia, ĐORĐEVIĆ 1952, Serbia, Yugoslavia), and from the ethnomedical standpoint as vestiges of traditional holistic beliefs about human health and its connection to nature and divinities (for instance for Serbia: TUCAKOV 1965, RADENKOVIĆ 1996, VIVOD 2015). The traces of this phenomenon, such as the texts of charms or fairy-tales were often analyzed as bits and pieces of the local folklore (e. g. for Serbia: ZEČEVIĆ 1981, RADENKOVIĆ 1996, ŠEŠO 2003

DORĐEVIĆ 1989). If this didn't confuse you, there are still a lot of other things coming.

There are at least a dozen languages spoken in Southeast Europe and each language has no less than 5–6 dialects. The semantical fields of expressions converging on the notion "fairy-seer" which I mentioned above, can be cosmic because the notion—the "signifier"—covers various kinds of "seers:" those who communicate with creatures and are able to fight with them by flying up in the sky; or those who can communicate with them and heal through them; or those who are only able to see them; or those who communicate and predict the future through them and do charms ... Those researchers who try to publish in English on their own initiative in a publication that necessarily is not about this topic, while using one the concepts typical for this field of research, usually have to go through Conrad's heart of darkness in order to explain, circumscribe some of these terms and their implicit meanings. Some of these authors have come up with a solution to label all the bunch of these fairy-seeing individuals and their subcategories as "communicators," sometimes also "sacral communicators." As a token of gratitude for their services these authors are usually labeled as provincials.

But this paper is not about them or their unjust sufferings. The use of the "communicator" is an "etic" denomination. See the debate etic/emic in anthropology, because I don't intend to explain it here. I prefer the emic approach because there are differences in "communicators" & "communication:" this is why I explained the problem of the not converging semantic fields. This is also why I vainly try to introduce an expression, the umbrella-term of "fairy-seer" since years. This paper is a small contribution to the already existing co-

nundrum of terms and knowledge about the gifted individuals who see fairies and communicate with them.

### Let's complicate things with what the notion of a fairy-seer implies

Once I was asked by an American editor to create a glossary of all the expressions I have used in an article about the Vlach fairy-seeing women. In order to depict the context I have elaborated first by mentioning all the research in the region which was done on this topic. The editor said that the enumeration of all these expressions is confusing. He wanted an exhaustive list of expressions, their meaning, their etymology and their exact English translation. I came up with this:

*krešnik* (m) *krsnik* (m) (Croatian)—(male) individuals with special, magical powers

*padalica* (f) (south Slavic)—“the one who falls”

*rusalka* (f) *rusalia* (f), *rusalja* (f) (origins unknown; Romanian, Vlach, Russian, Polish, South Slavic)—fairy/the one who can communicate with fairies

*šojmanka* (f) (origins unknown; used in Vlach) — the one who is able to communicate with fairies

*šojmanosa* (f) (origins unknown; used in Vlach)— the one who is able to communicate with fairies

*vilarka* (f), *vilar* (m) (south Slavic from the word “vila”-fairy)—“the one from the fairy”

*vilenica* (f), *vilenjak* (m) (south Slavic from the word “vile” Pl.—fairies)—“the one from the fairies”

In short: this list is a bunch of poppycock and I am being polite here. All terms are—more or less—designations for people with special powers. However, for most of these expressions there is no exact translation into English, or in Naro, when we are at it. Their etymology is often unknown. Their use is casual and depends on the region of their dialect. Usually these terms are referenced in their original version, except if the editor or your publication has a degree in fat studies. I have sent along to the editor a two page commentary of the list explaining these nuances, mentioning that the list is far from being complete. Eventually, the editor abstained from his idea and the glossary was not published (luckily). So I avoided being a laughing

stock between the connoisseurs. At least for the time being.

The fairy-seers of Southeastern Europe are mostly women who are able to communicate with women-like creatures from the supernatural world. The thing is that sometimes these women are called by the same designation as the creatures they see/are able to communicate with. This is quite logical in the Balkans or in the neighborhood. It is illogical for others. Researchers speculate that this is because the seers by being able to see or communicate with these creatures create a special bondage with them, establishing kinship. This stance is plausible, because these women often refer to these creatures as their “sisters.” These women fall into trance by dancing and singing on special days of the orthodox Christian/Vlach calendar. The “special days” vary from one woman to another. Different women pick/choose different days of the Christian/Vlach Orthodox Calendar.

Sometimes the fairy-seers induce a trance-like state in order to establish a communication with these creatures. I was asked countless times if the trance is real. I don't know and I don't really care. But the thing is that if a person walks to the top of a mountain, sometimes in snow deep to her knees, and sings incessantly for hours—shouts from the top of her lungs, dances like crazy, every year on a particular day since decades, even if there are no people present “in the public” to witness it—I'm not going to be the one questioning her veracity. When communicating with the fairies the fairy-seers can prophesy future events. The fairy-seers can also bring messages to the living from their deceased relatives. In such a consultation, I received a message from my paternal grandmother whom I did not like much when she was alive. So I guess this part cannot be questioned for veracity either.

Similarly, fairy-seeing individuals can give advice about how to heal an ill individual or they can proceed to treating the ill individual after consulting the fairies. These illnesses are usually a form of so called “fairy-illness”—a disorder which has its origins in a curse or a spell by the human-offended fairies. The fairies are described in the narratives of fairy-seers as three young, beautiful longhaired women, dressed either in white or in black. The women who can see them can speak to them and are chosen by the fairies early on, usu-

ally in their childhood or adolescence. Šojmanje, šojmanka, šojmanosa—Are you confused yet?

In the 1950 paper a Yugoslav ethnographer PERSIDA TOMIĆ gives a detailed description of the fairy-seeing phenomena from Central Serbia by the ethnic minority of the “Vlach Gypsies” (*vlaški cigani* in Serbian). When Persida Tomić wrote that paper she couldn’t imagine what a mess her paper will create. The word *šojmanosa* as a notion first appeared in her article. It was an important paper, a firsthand ethnography, a “must-read” for those who study the phenomenon of fairy-seeing individuals in the Balkans. This was the moment when the word *šojmanosa* entered the scientific bibliography. But no-one ever was able to confirm her observations. It seemed that Tomić described a phenomenon that afterwards disappeared without a trace. Luckily for Persida, she published photos too, otherwise the academicians would probably conclude that she drank too much slivovitz while doing fieldwork.

Then, sixty years later, while I was trying to research on the vernacular religion in Vojvodina, I stumbled by chance on the expression *šojmanka* in Eastern Serbia. Being a great fan of Persida’s paper I immediately presumed that this designation has something to do with *šojmanosa*. It felt like discovering penicillin. There was finally a trace of something that was described by Tomić ... The plan was easy: I was to travel there and film as much as I can and take notes. This part was easy. But writing in English about it was a different game. It felt like you play chess all your life and suddenly you find yourself on the field among players of American football.

Persida did not speak Vlach. She was also referring to the fairy-seers as the “*šojmanose*” [Vlach term] or the *vilarka-s* [feminine form, one of the Serbian terms] or *vilar-s* [masculine form, one of the Serbian terms]. This particularity is mentioned in the book of ZORAN ČIČA (2002) whose topic is the phenomenon of fairy-seeing individuals in a historical perspective, principally during the witch-hunting period. Čiča treats the topic from the diachronic perspective and he also writes about the Christian “contamination” of this phenomenon. Particularly the Christian savant perspective about the nightly gatherings of women who are initiated in practice of healing and charming which were labeled as the Sabbath

of the witches is examined in detail. He notices that Persida Tomić doesn’t make a distinction if the *šojmanka* are women (otherwise called *vilarka-s* or *vilar-s* in Serbian) who can see the women-like creatures or if this name can be also applied to the creatures who are seen by them (which are termed “fairies” = *vile* in the article). His excellent book deals with the topic of fairy-seeing, fairy-communicating individuals, for which he is using the terms *vilenica-s* and *vilenjak-s* (the usual terms in Croatian speaking regions). In his study based on the examination of historical documents (mostly witch trials in Croatia), *vilenica-s* and *vilenjak-s* [Croatian terms] were individuals who treated ill individuals and who were mediators between the human world and the invisible world. Čiča calls the phenomenon of “*vilenica* and *vilenjak* the remnants of a pre-Christian cult” (ČIČA 2002). In both cases, Tomić and Čiča do not dwell on the signification of the Vlach term *šojmanka*. And why would they? It is in Vlach. It is taken as if this were the Vlach term of the same “fairy-seeing” phenomenon.

I wrote to Čiča and sent him a draft of my paper with the link to my documentary I made on the topic after my fieldwork: [www.imdb.com/vidео/wab/vi796439833/](http://www.imdb.com/vidео/wab/vi796439833/). His answer was short and far less enthusiastic than I expected. He seemed not be too interested in the discovery of penicillin. Tomić provides us with a detailed account of fairy-seeing events that she observed in 1946/47. She starts with a description of the main characteristics of the *šojmanka-s*. She employs this term and uses it in parallel with the Serbian terms of *vilarka* (feminine) and *vilar* (masculine). The fact that the healing and the communication happens in a state of the trance pushes her to compare this phenomenon with another Vlach phenomena, the *rusalje-s* of Duboko (*dubočke rusalje*—Serbian term, but also used in Vlach and Romanian)—the *rusalje-s* from the village of Duboko. These are women who fall regularly into trance on specific days in a year. But she does not mention other characteristics of the *rusalje-s* in which she is not interested. Tomić mentions that three female “creatures”—“fairies” (*vile*) in the article—are seen by these women while in trance on specific days. The *vilarka-s* treat illnesses brought by fairies on these days. What is captivating is that Tomić notes that usually the fairy-seeing women have some physical

impairment, which is a condition—according to her—making these women more suitable for this otherwise solitary profession. Tomić also traces down the migration of this Gypsy community from Romania, from the region where the Vlach communities originate, and which occurred during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The etymology of the *šojmanke* is not elaborated.

Although Tomić's study became in the meantime one of the great classics for those who work on the topic of fairy-seers or fairies it has been criticized exactly because of this default. Language is also one of the main reasons why the study of Vlach customs and communities in Serbia is difficult. When I stumbled on the word of *šojmanka*, it was thanks to a video which a local Vlach ethnographer in retreat had uploaded on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QVr4xib3xXk>. It was a video filmed and translated by Paun Es Durlić, an ethnographer in pension. I immediately contacted him. According to him<sup>1</sup>, most of the “mistakes” in ethnographic descriptions and analysis of the Vlach customs stem from the fact that the Serbian ethnographers do not understand and speak this Neo-Latin language and regularly confound the Serbian Christian calendar with the traditional “Vlach calendar” that is based on pre-Christian beliefs and “almanac” (see more in DURLIĆ 2010). This is also the biggest lack of Tomić's article: she didn't speak Vlach and didn't ask for the meaning of the word, nor on what it referred to. The word *šojmanka* does not exist in the official Vlach language and it is unclear what it means<sup>2</sup>. The Vlach communities in eastern Serbia know and use the term *šojmanka* but the origins of this word are also unknown and they describe the creatures that a fairy-seer can see. According to this Vlach ethnographer the term “*manosa*” means “abundant” in the Vlach language while the “*šoj*” is unknown. In the villages described by Tomić, Temnić and Belica, the “Vlach Gypsy” population turned into “Gypsy” population and nobody speaks Vlach anymore<sup>3</sup>. Needless to say, that the custom of *šojmanosa* also disappeared since the 1950s. Are you confused yet?

Building on Tomić's legacy—among other monographs, papers and historical documents—ČIČA wrote a book (2002a) utterly dedicated to the description and the analysis of the *vilenica*-s (feminine) and the *vilenjak*-s. Čiča offers a com-

parative table inspired by a similar table created by GINZBURG (1991) of terms from across Europe of individuals, whether healers or seers, who can communicate with feminine creatures and who potentially even engage in heavenly, nightly battles against those seers who send evil to their opponent's region.<sup>4</sup> There are the *benandanti* from Friuli, the *armiere* from Ariège, the *punchiaduri* from Switzerland or the *krešnik/krsnik* from Istria (GINZBURG 1966, KLANICZAY 1986, BOŠKOVIĆ-STULLI 1960). The Croatian (Bosnian) *vilenica* or the *vilenjak* is also among these common mortals who can see and communicate with female creatures from the invisible world. Čiča's table depicts well the “Babylonian-like” abundance in terms and notions of this phenomenon of fairy-seeing healers. But the *šojmanka* or the *šojmanosa*, as well as the *rusalia*-s are not amongst them although their place is certainly among them. The abundance of various ethno-linguistic groups in this region and the profusion of languages and dialects impede the broadening of the chart. We need a genius-polyglot who is interested in doing research in 550.000 km<sup>2</sup> and spend probably fifty years in various archives. Indisputably the Ginzburg-chart and Čiča's table cover a waste geographical terrain with numerous names and their variations. In that spirit, this article is also an attempt to complement these two tables with contemporary findings the already existing material and charts.

### The case-studies—This is the part people like to read about

Ivanka (\*1956) is a Vlach farmer woman from eastern Serbia, living in an isolated farm with her husband and a grown-up son on top of the mountain called Pojenj near the village of Kulma Topolnica. She has three children and was married twice. The first husband has left her and according to her words “disappeared.” The disappearance of her husband coincided with her initiation into the world of her “sisters.” In spite of her being a *šojmanka* (the Vlach term of her social status) and “*padalica*” (a Serbian term used in the region to describe Ivanka's ability to fall into trance) she married a second time, at her “great surprise” as she says. She says she never imagined that she will have two husbands. Her initiation happened





**Fig. 1:** Ivanca – April 2015, see also Fig. 2 and 3 on p. 199. (Photos: Maria Vivod)

when she was about twenty to twenty-one years old. She was found by her mother-in-law in the top of a pear tree. She was oblivious of herself. Her two daughters got scared by her. She was singing on the top of the pear tree. She describes the creatures that she has continued to see on regular basis as beautiful young long-haired (blond) women dressed in white. She also named them as: *Sinziana*, *Maria* and *Majka Prečasa* [Holy Mother?]. They appear to her on specific days and speak to her, and then she has to transmit their messages and instructions to the living. She tried to avoid her sisters at the beginning: she hid herself in a stack of hay to escape them but as she says these creatures always managed to find her, punished her physically and brought her back to the top of a pear or cherry tree. These creatures punished her transgressions or her avoidance by taking away her voice, paralyzing her or beating her. She says that she had blue marks on her body from the beatings of these creatures. As she says: “[she] had to obey them.” In her “fall”—as she calls the state in which she is oblivious of herself and the [human] world around her, she sees the world of these creatures: beautiful pastures and fields covered with flowers. She sings a particular song every time to put herself in a state of trance:

In a field covered with flowers I climb, climb, with my sisters on the Krš [a mountain in the region?] up, up. In a field covered with flowers I go down with my sisters to the pear tree; my sisters make me climb the pear tree. And they are young, my sisters. In a field covered with flowers I climb, I climb with my sisters on the Krš up, up.

She says that these creatures can be seen by everyone who wants to see them. It is just a matter of will. Her “special” days—when she has to submit herself to the will and the demands of these creatures—are three specific days of the Christian orthodox calendar: Epiphany (*Bogojavljanje*—Three King’s Day), Palm Sunday (*Cveti*), and St. Peter’s Day (*Petrovdan*). On every occasion she obtains information from her sisters about when they are going to appear the next time.

The ritual of trance starts at dawn early in the morning. That day Ivanka frees herself from working in the stables to stay clean, as these otherworldly creatures abhor filthy, unclean clothes, people and places. She washes herself, avoids speaking (they prohibited her to speak before the ritual) and she dresses in light-colored clothes. She goes outside into the court and turns toward east. She picks a place and stands and then closes her eyes. She is holding a three branched basil (Lat. *Ocimum basi-*

*licum*) in her hand that she will keep on holding the whole time of her trance and consultation with people who come to see her that day. She also has to be “clean” (not menstruating) as have the women who attend the ritual or who come to consult her three sisters through her. Her husband related about cases when women were sent away because they were “unclean” and this happened without these women even admitted having their period.

The length of the trance varies: some days it can last an hour, but occasions when it lasted for four hours were also witnessed. Ivanka sings “her” song, dances, and shouts and calls her sisters invoking their coming and whistles in turns. Ivanka starts singing and alternately she speaks to them (she seems to summon them). It seems that Ivanka participates in some—for us observers—invisible gathering/feast/celebration where the fairies dance. There is music (Ivanka relates about this) and everybody, present in this world, dances (so Ivanka describes to us while being in trance). She is transmitting to the present individuals, who sometimes come from other regions to consult the *šojmanje* or the *vlva-s* (Vlach word “fairy” as these three creatures are (also) called), what she is witnessing in the other world. She transmits the feast-like atmosphere that precedes the coming of these creatures. She proceeds first by foretelling the future of the region, giving accounts of future accidents, future sudden deaths or forthcoming misfortunes or imminent great events in the country. For instance, in 2006 she predicted the coming of a president who is going to be as Tito.

When she is completely “taken”—possessed—by her sisters she asks to be taken into her house. The house has to be clean, particularly a chair on which she will sit that day. The person, a woman, who came first that day (usually her neighbor), will help her to get back into the house. In her bedroom, sitting on a chair with her eyes closed she will receive her visitors one by one. First, the consultation proceeds “about the living” (*za žive* in Serbian). Individuals or families can consult Ivanka’s sisters through her mouth about their personal or family’s future. When the consultation “for the living” ends, there is another “tour:” one by one the individuals re-enter and consult Ivanka about their deceased relatives. This part is called “for the dead” (*za mrtve* in Serbian). This time, flowers and candles have to be brought. The number of can-

dles has to be the same as the number of those, about whose wellbeing the person would like to enquire. Along with her sisters, Ivanka can see and talk with the deceased as well. The dead send their request to the living: if they would like a visit to their graves, flowers, candles or a *pomana* (Vlach word, designating a sort of Vlach commemoration that includes bringing new clothes to the dead on their graves or bringing favorite food and drink).

The most important day in a year when Ivanka can see her sisters, her biggest “feast” (*slava* or *praznjik*) is *Cveti* (Palm Sunday). Her house being on the top of a mountain is very difficult to reach. The author of this article had to rent a jeep that “cut” through a muddy road to access the house in early spring. From three occasions, in at least two it is extremely difficult to venture to the top of the Pojenj. Especially in wintertime for Epiphany, when the snow can be knee-high and covers the muddy road, the coming and going to her house is difficult. Falling in trance (including the singing, dancing, whistling and shouting out prophecies) consumes a tremendous amount of energy. In spring 2015, when the author of this article had the chance to observe her, Ivanka has “fallen” for her last time. In autumn that year Ivanka turned sixty. She revealed to the author that the fairies are visible only to women between six to sixty years old. She will continue to heal people from charms and spell (“fairy-illnesses”) but she will not transmit the messages of her “sisters” anymore, she will not foresee the future anymore and she will not see the *šojmanje* either.

**Mila (\*1944)** is another woman-*padalica* in the region. She is living in the village of Crnajka, about 15 km from Kulma Topolnica. The two women know each other and they are sending each other individuals/clients who seek to consult the *šojmanje*. Ivanka even sent her son for a consultation to Mila. Ivanka’s son is considered the village idiot because of his speech impairment and the fact that he is single and above 30 years old. Her husband is mocked too by the village-people.

Mila has one son, and she lost two children in their early infancy. She is a daughter of an unmarried mother. This personal circumstance adds to her reputation as a successful seer or *padalica* because of the beliefs of magical performances and characteristics of individuals born out of wedlock.

This attitude is widespread in the Vlach community (for more see DURLIĆ 1995). Their hair or nails are believed to have magical virtues and are components of talismans or magical beverages. Children born out of wedlock are believed to be born “from love” (*iz ljubavi* in Serbian) and not because of “must” (*moranje* in Serbian) which is a characteristic of children born in a marriage. Children born in a marriage are born “out of duty” (for more about this belief see DURLIĆ 1995). On the question about her parents and her life Mila answered that she does not know her father and it could have been anyone. Although this fact is advantageous for her profession she was slightly in discomfort answering this question.

She was married at the age of fifteen and she is illiterate: she cannot read or write. She said she had a happy marriage, but when I met her in 2015 she was a widow already since a couple of years. Her husband actively supported her calling as a fairy-seer. Mila started “falling” since the age of twelve years old. In Vlach tradition there are 44 “feast” (*slava*) in a year. In her youth Mila used to fall quiet frequently (she didn’t explained on which days from the total of 44 but stated it was very frequent). With time Mila “fell” less and less frequently, and by the time I’ve met her she only kept one or two *slavas* (meaning: she “fell” only on two occasions in a year: Epiphany & St. Peter’s day on the Greek Orthodox Calendar). Mila was able to fall into trance in her youth for 44 of Vlach feast-days (*slava* or *praznjik*—this term differs from Serbian orthodox *slava* (for more see DURLIĆ 1998). Her “technic” to fall into trance is also different from Ivanka’s: she lies in her bedroom and speaks, sings to her sisters. She coxes herself into a trance by speaking, calling and singing to these creatures. She also sees three young, beautiful long-haired women but she didn’t want to tell their names. As a matter of fact, she suspected me for being also a “seer” (*i ti vidiš nešto?* in Serbian).

What one has to know about this and similar accusations is that these women who can see fairies “recognize” each other and believe they belong to the same “kinship.” They are also informed if a new fairy-seer is “born” in the region (see infra). So, I guess, Mila’s question was more than just rhetorical. She is possibly seeking for some new “fairy-kinship.” The first time I visited her she refused to speak with me. A couple of weeks later



Fig: 2 + 3

when I returned, she admitted that she dreamt of me and she realized that she did me wrong for not speaking with me. The fact that I appeared in her dream made her suspicious in my “capacities” ... So actually, I felt pretty pissed when she refused to speak with me the first time, and she had the chance later to ask around who I was, so this dream was a way to turn a new page between us. Or I do have some special powers.

She is also falling into trance in private. Once in trance she receives one by one her visitors while lying in bed. The recitations and the song she sings during her trance were recorded in secret by a Vlach ethnographer who asked Mila’s son to hide a tape-recorder during one her “falls” in the room where Mila was lying and was assisted by her husband.

Mila’s initiation also happened on the top of a tree (pear tree). She was only 12 years old when she first saw “her sisters.” She also tried to avoid them, hiding herself. She also made transgressions, disobeying them and was ill because of her transgressions. She was paralyzed by them and couldn’t speak or move. As she grew older the occasions of her “falls” became rarer; nowadays she still “falls” but only a couple of times during a year. She also falls on Epiphany as Ivanka and she falls on Pentecost too. She puts herself into trance on the evening before the actual day of the feast be-

cause it is considered that with nightfall the day of the *slava* actually starts.

The two women are both respected in their community. Ivanka is particularly loved in her community and she goes as a good person. She is described as a gentle and kind woman. Mila is described as an ambiguous woman though; people say that she is into fairy-seeing for money. In a way both are liminal individuals: Mila is born out of wedlock, Ivanka was abandoned by her first husband, married a “strange” and grungy second husband and has a son who is laughing stock in their village. Both of them fear their “sisters” and the illnesses and pain that come if they refuse to fall into trance and to “perform” in public. The procedure of the trance is particularly difficult for Ivanka: she sometimes has to accomplish her practice of trance in a deep snow, in a cold air - considering that even spring is cold in that mountain region.

Ivanka engages during the year as a charmer, a *bajalica* (Serbian term for “charmer” or *baca zrnelje* [Serbian]—throwing seeds of corn from which she reads the future and the past and can detect a bad charm). After her “duty” to the *šojmanje* has ended in spring 2015, she will be a charmer the rest of her days. Mila is also known in the region as a charmer: she is “lifting” charms, reads cards, and reads from grains of corn. In the region, foretelling the future was done using grains of corn. Mila’s activity of divination (*gatanje* in Serbian) with cards is partially disapproved in her community: cards are “devil’s” work, as said by another, older *gatalica* (Serbian: clairvoyant) from the region, “the real way” is by ‘reading from the grains [of corn].’<sup>6</sup> Mila uses the so called “Hungarian cards” or Tell cards. These cards are very unusual and “exotic” for Eastern Serbia, while they are very common 200 km up North where an important Hungarian ethnic minority lives. Both women, Ivanka and Mila are considered as old women. Since a couple of years, both of them—probably aware that they will not live for long—started predicting about a new fairy-seer (without giving precise details whom that might be). Their region knows about this “prediction” and people in the region interpret any up-surging incident in the light of this prediction (a young girl behaving strangely, an epileptic seizure of someone ... etc.)

Both women stated that there is a third “fairy-seer” in the region Crnajka-Topolnica who is “ex-

pected:” both of the women described (predicted?) a (be)coming of a new *padalica*. I asked in the village of Rudna Glava about a possible third woman who can see fairies. There were rumors about a schoolgirl who “has fallen” in the primary school (she was then about 12–13 years old). Her fall was first interpreted as some kind of seizure by her parents and her surrounding until the pattern of fairy-seeing was discovered by the members of the community. It turned out that she was not “talking gibberish” as her parents and teacher thought; she was speaking to the fairies—as I was told. She got married in her early twenties and moved away from this region. I tried to contact her. She answered that her father-in-law has forbidden her from “falling” and that she was not willing to speak with me. Presumably she is the “third” fairy-seer, the “new one” who is expected to continue now that Ivanka is “done with her duty” and Mila is growing old.

Asked what is going on during their trance both Ivanka and Mila answered with the same sentence: that they simply do not know. Both explained that they are oblivious of what is actually happening to them or what is going on around them. They are “taken” (*uzmu me pod svoje*). Mila moreover added: “you don’t know what is happening to you when you faint, don’t you? It is the same for me. I don’t know what is going on.” The main motivation that is consistently mentioned by both women are their past experiences when they transgressed or wanted to avoid their obligation to serve as mediators and to transmit messages or to attend the feast of these creatures. The fear of being hurt in some way makes them fall into trance over and over again: it is a fear of some physical accident, of an illness, or the fear of some misfortune that is certain if they transgress. This fear is their main stimulus to engage year after year even in most difficult climatic conditions (as in the case of Ivanka) of fairy-seeing activities. These creatures can and will hurt as they have proven in the past to both of these women. The past experiences are usually mentioned even without being asked “what happens if you refuse to fall”—as if they anticipate and somehow justify their obligation to fall. The cases when they were hurt are willingly exposed and described in detail. These past experiences are a *sine qua non* to the condition of the fairy-seers, and it seems they have to endure this stage between



their initiation and their established “career” of being a fairy-seer. That fear of pain and physical harm is mentioned as their main motivation. Indisputably, there is a material gain from this practice, which remains secondary but also important for continuing the practice of being a fairy-seer.

In the case of Mila this is more than obvious, although in her statements she denies her motivation for money. I had the occasion to see her receiving gifts (a key-holder in a jewelry-box) after the usual consultation for charming. Her disappointment with the gift was more than obvious and she did not hesitate to reject the gift with an exhibited disgust (although her words remained polite).

She is also one of the *padalica*-s in the region who receives rewards in money in a traditional way described as the usual *modus operandi* for a *bajalica* to be paid (RADENKOVIĆ 1996: 13 ref. from DIMKOVA 1980): the *bajalica* asks the money to be put down on the ground and she steps on it with one foot. This a custom in which the *bajalica* does not touch the money “directly” but rather “indirectly” (with her feet) and is a symbolic way to show the (symbolic) disregard toward money and any financial gain. It is strongly believed and often repeated that a *bajalica* will lose her powers of clairvoyance and charming if she is in it for money. In Ivanka’s case, during the day of her fall I have consulted her twice (“for the living” and “for the dead”). Both times, I put a bill in Serbian dinars of approximately 5€ value on her apron while she was sitting on a chair in her bedroom for her services—as the custom requires. The second time she gave back the money to my cameraman, whom she believed to be my husband. She said to him that the bill was “for the fairies and he [the cameraman] should give it to them when he sees them.” This scared the crap out of my cameraman. In the case of the third fairy-seer in the region, the young woman whose father-in-law prohibited her to practice, the “door was left open:” she didn’t say that she cannot see the fairies, she said that it was prohibited for her to practice. This potentially means that somewhere in the future she might engage in this activity. In case her father-in-law dies, or she gets divorced, or ...

The preliminary and the most rudimentary conclusion about the main motivation of these women to continue engaging in the activity of

trance, which is a public event—for the usually shy Ivanka a very challenging exhibition in public—is definitely the fear of physical harm in form of illness, a temporary paralysis or an accident. That fear remains the main motivation in engaging in such a practice.

When I submitted an earlier version of my research on these two cases of *šojmanka*-s, the reviewers explicitly asked me to draw a parallel between the phenomenon of shamanism and this phenomenon. I was pretty reluctant to do so, because I am not an expert of shamanism. But when two of your three reviewers are asking such thing, the author has to comply. This practice follows the principle “If Your Only Tool Is a Hammer Then Every Problem Looks Like a Nail.” I felt lucky that they are not specialist of gender studies. I guess this practice has some common characteristics with a form of shamanism. I really have no idea. And I do not care. Finding *šojmanka/šojmanosa* of the field sixty years after Persida Tomić paper felt like discovering penicillin. And for the time being this is quite enough for me.

## Notes

**1** Paun Es Durlić, a native speaker of Vlach language, a retired ethnographer who worked in the Museum of Majdanpek, Serbia and is an author of numerous articles about the culture and the language of the Vlach community of Eastern Serbia. For his work (publications, online Vlach dictionary and other ethnographic collections): <http://www.paundurlic.com>.

**2** Paun Es Durlić.

**3** Second hand testimony (summer 2015) from the villages of Temnić and Belica.

**4** Tables: Čiča 2002a: 94, Ginsburg 1991: 98–99. Note of the editors: The technical quality of the tables has been too poor for reproduction.

**5** Various individuals from the region, neighbors, etc. have told me that Mila “is in this” (in divination and fairy-seeing) for money (fieldwork spring and summer 2015, villages: Topolnica, Crnajka, Rudna Glava).

**6** There is a third woman in the region (near the village of Crnajka), who is the oldest among these three women (born 1938). Her name is Desanka and she is known not only in the region for her gift of divination. She is using grains of corn to predict the future, to see the past. She is also good in “lifting evil charms.” She stated that her gift of clairvoyance comes from three female angels (sic) that she saw as a child in the orchard of her parents’ house. She is not a *padalica* though. She is not falling into trance in order to communicate with the “angels.” She states that Mila’s divination with cards comes from the devil.

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